IMAGINING AMERICA
artists + scholars in public life

Leading and Learning Initiative: Shifting Institutional Culture to Fortify Public Scholarship

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Founding

With funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Leading and Learning Initiative (LLI) was launched at the Leadership Forum of Imagining America's (IA) 2019 National Gathering in Albuquerque, New Mexico. At this event, the research team[1] shared the hopes and goals of the LLI and engaged in dialogue with members of a newly formed Leadership Cohort[2] and Network Advisors group.[3] The main goals of this action-research initiative include the following:

1. **Produce and present original actionable research** that holds institutions of higher education accountable to support public and activist scholarship that engages the methodologies of art, design, and humanities.

2. **Connect and convene a national network of campus and associational leaders and graduate student scholars** committed to activist and public scholarship to guide the research and build a collective multi-faceted voice towards advocacy and action.

3. **Produce interactive guides, tools, resources, and media** that students, scholars, and leaders can use to advocate for change towards greater support of public and activist scholarship, with compelling examples of how to do so.

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Refining Our Questions

With feedback from the Leadership Cohort and Network Advisors in the fall of 2019, we narrowed the research agenda and developed questions for the pilot interviews conducted with members of the LLI Leadership Cohort during the winter of 2020. The primary purpose of the interviews was to collect first-hand accounts of the following:

1. The aspects of institutional life that marginalize activist and public scholarship which are most stubbornly resistant to change.

2. What institutional change looks like in practice, through small or large-scale examples.

3. The most effective approaches to organizing and catalyzing institutional change, including key strategies and frameworks for addressing entrenched institutional culture traits that marginalize and discourage activist and public scholarship.

Deepening Our Analysis

Our research and action plan for year two was further refined based on what we learned in year one. Year one activities included 27 interviews with the Leadership Cohort, presentations and dialogue during the LLI Organizing Institute in June 2020, thirty in-depth interviews conducted and analyzed by Lizbeth De La Cruz Santana and Alana Stein (LLI Fellows from the Davis Humanities Institute Mellon Public Scholars), and dialogues organized through three related IA Teaching and Learning Circle webinars featuring higher education leaders and activist scholars, including Kal Alston, KerryAnn O'Meara, Wayne Yang (aka la paperson), Jack Tchen, Eric Hartman, Margo Okazawa-Rey, John Saltmarsh, Colette Cann and Eric DeMeulenaere.

Visual notes created by Rogue Mark Studios during the Organizing Institute 2020

Entrenched Unequal Institutional Histories, Cultures and Disciplines

In the first year, the research conversation was squarely grounded in recognition of long-standing histories and ongoing practices in higher education that maintain relationships of inequality and oppression – from universities financed by theft of indigenous lands or profits from the slave trade, to ongoing market logics and assimilationist social frameworks that reproduce unequal treatment of and endanger futures for public, activist, and engaged scholars. We heard about the specific ways in which ideas and practices that marginalize public scholars are further exacerbated across social locations such as race, class, gender, ability, and differential material needs.

We repeatedly heard about how these patterns produce a striking contradiction between stated and operationalized institutional values. Institutions often claim to value community-engaged, collaborative, diverse, social change, and equity-based work in their missions yet internally organize around the norms and structures that reward individualism, competition, prestige, assimilation, and the status quo. For instance, institutions which strive to diversify the student body and faculty often do not address the *de facto* institutional culture and conditions which create an exclusionary and inhospitable environment for BIPOC and other traditionally marginalized individuals they seek to include. Throughout the interviews, we heard different variations on the narrative that even as colleges and universities publicly recognize engaged, public, and activist scholarship, they often do not alter institutional structures or culture to recognize and reward this work. The majority of the institutional leaders interviewed agreed that most often universities and colleges are conservative, slow-moving, overly bureaucratic, and extremely resistant to change.

As vividly described in the data, these institutional patterns are further maintained through traditional academic disciplinary beliefs, practices, and standards, many of which uphold colonialism, patriarchy, and a fixed, particularly Western, vision of the production of knowledge and research "excellence." Narrow conceptions of what meaningful research can look like are often carefully contained and managed by traditional disciplinary peers. As described through the graduate student interviews, transmission of these ideas and attitudes usually begin during graduate school, influencing and limiting the scope and type of research conducted by early career activist, public, and engaged scholars. As a result, many are encouraged to do this work in the margins or to abandon it all together. These limitations are often accompanied by feelings of fear, isolation, and competition, which result in toxic work cultures and exacerbate individualized mental health struggles rather than acknowledging collective problems.

At the heart of these localized patterns is a persistent lack of understanding, or in some cases refusal, among the most strident disciplinary gatekeepers of the diverse epistemologies, methodologies, theories, norms, practices, and values of rigorous engaged, public, and activist scholarship. The structural contradictions experienced by activist, public, or engaged scholars with urgent and longstanding community-based and movement commitments within slow-moving conservative institutions that validate particularly colonial and Western disciplinary norms, is fundamentally inter-connected and further exacerbated along the lines of race, gender, ability, and socio-economic class.

Ultimately, the politics of knowledge production plays out in the everyday interactions within academic institutions and across campus regions, lifting and validating some voices and ideas while marginalizing others.

Organizing Change and Building Power

Despite these enduring challenges, the LLI research also revealed a deep commitment and vibrant practice among public, engaged, and activist scholars and allied campus leaders to shift institutional culture toward a more expansive understanding of what knowledge is, who is considered a scholar, and how to lift, support, and catalyze impactful public scholarship. This hopeful and timely work is the focus of year two of the LLI. Thus far, we have identified three main ways in which "institutional catalysts" are attempting to shift culture and policy in higher education. One approach involves long haul relational organizing, connecting scholars, advocates, and students in meaningful coalitions and decision-making bodies. Another takes the community building or "undercommons" approach, by cultivating radical spaces of hope and imagination on campus and in classrooms by allocating resources and engaging in collaborative research with allied movements and communities. A third space of change involves brokered relationships of power where existing frameworks in traditional academic units are challenged, negotiated, and altered. Within all of these approaches we are primarily interested in how the specific methodologies within disciplines of art, design, and humanities can foster new understandings, relationships, and stories that intervene on the pressing challenges of our time.
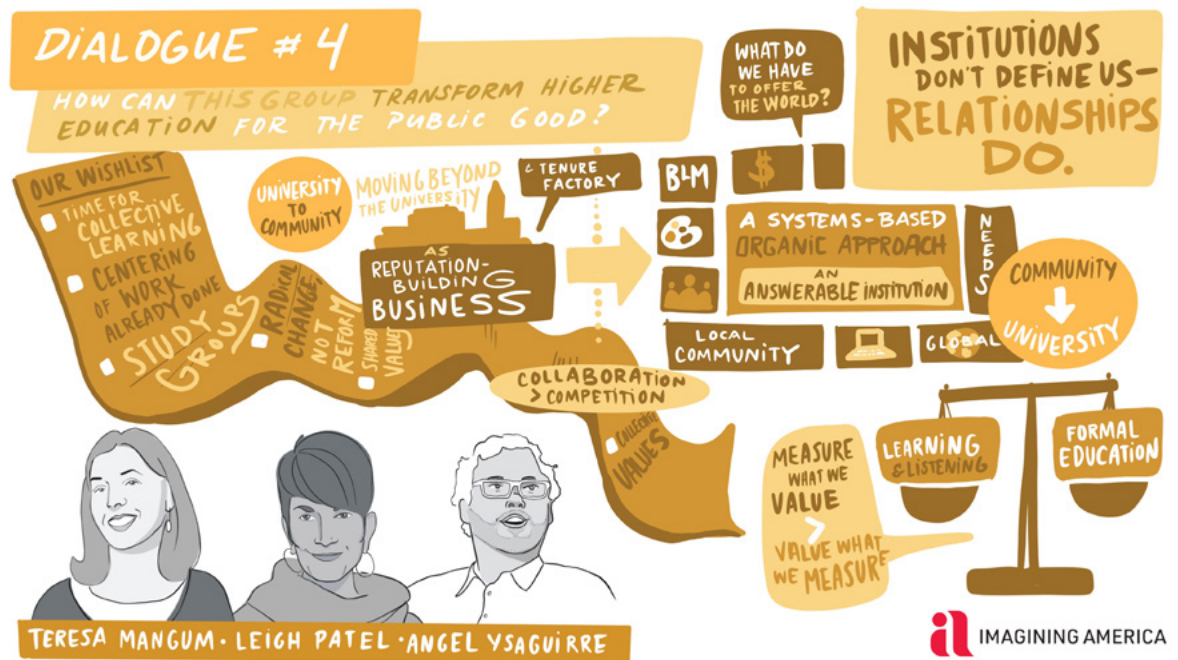
Visual notes created by Rogue Mark Studios during the OI 2020

Plans for Year Two

Informed by year one, the three overlapping research areas for year two include: (a) documenting the collaborative scholarship and change work of activist-scholars themselves, across university-community borders, centering those who most directly experience the structural contradictions described above, (b) the negotiations of institutional catalysts who hold significant institutional power (or political power from without), and (c) demonstration projects that reveal the power of public, engaged, and activist work through the methodologies of arts, design, and humanities that address the pressing public challenges of our time.

The research questions below, grounded in our assumptions surrounding the structural contradictions described above, direct year two of the LLI. These questions are also guided by the assumption that the advocates with the potential to radically transform higher education will be those who insist on a more expansive understanding of valuing knowledge production and entirely new rationales for organizing higher education. In this phase of inquiry, we will include institutions of different types, as well as individuals in a variety of institutional positions. We will also look for instances where actors and initiatives in our three research areas (public scholars, institutional catalysts, and demonstration projects) inform and interact with one another.

Research Questions

1. **How might the experiences and engaged work of less institutionally acknowledged knowledge producers (activist-scholars, artist-scholars, and voices of BIPOC, women, queer, and community-based scholars and culture keepers) radically expand our understanding of knowledge production?**

   a. How have these scholars made ideas travel from academic research into the public sphere and social change agendas? What are the most powerful ideas and methodologies for organizing change?

   b. How are activist, engaged, and traditionally marginalized knowledge producers building relationships and power to challenge patterns of inequality and exclusion within and across campus-community lines?

   c. How do we center public and activist faculty, staff, students, and community-based researchers and artists in the university change agenda?

2. **How do individual institutional catalysts in positions of power further leverage change agendas?**

   a. What are the most effective strategies utilized by institutional leaders who are committed to brokering change on behalf of public and activist scholars along racial, gender, and other critical social lines?

   b. How do they remove barriers to communication and trust and speak back to the status quo? What are the most critical institutional levers to incite change? How do

they address enduring inequalities within institutions more comfortable with slow-paced incremental change?

c. How do institutional leaders make sense of and negotiate the structural contradictions embedded within their own roles and identities within institutions often resistant to change?

d. How can catalysts who wield power from the outside put pressure on higher education? What is the power of learned societies, disciplinary organizations, accreditors, and funders to expand who and what is legitimized in academia?

e. What can we learn through a study of these actors about how institutional change happens? How can new, less constricting, or coercive forms of power animate institutional change?

3. **How might the creative methodologies and forms of knowledge production in the arts, design, and humanities make higher education more responsive to public needs while also strengthening opportunities and learning for scholars, teachers, staff, and students?**

a. What role does critical pedagogy and engaged learning play in shifting campus culture?

b. What role do truly reciprocal campus initiatives play in shifting norms of knowledge production and recognition?

c. What are the current opportunities and challenges to producing engaged art, design, and humanities work on pressing public issues today (across different institutional types during the COVID-19 pandemic and the current moment of racial justice organizing and climate crisis)?

i. How can we prevent this current moment from further marginalizing those historically undervalued in the university?

ii. How do we engage in work that is critical of higher education but that does not further erode resources?

▍ *Research Methods*

Invited Case Studies: Coming Soon! In January of 2021 IA will release a call for case studies to profile projects, partnerships, initiatives, and campus change efforts that address any or all of the three research questions above. The LLI will award funds to a total of 15-20 projects, inviting multi-media documentation for sharing during the LLI year three communications campaign. Half of the awarded case studies will be invited and the other half selected through a competitive call from IA member campuses. For each case study, the LLI will invite the following documentation and engagement opportunities. This framework and budget is currently under development towards a January 2021 call for submissions:

1. **Case Study Documentation:** Each selected case study will produce a written 3-5 page short story with photographs in response to the LLI research questions. Case study authors will also produce a 5-7 minute video with support from the LLI.

2. **Engagement:** Case study authors and participants will also be invited to participate in live dialogues via the IA Teaching and Learning Circle webinar platform, a feature podcast recording with IA StoryShare, and/or participation at the IA National Gathering.

Qualitative Interviews: From January–March 2021, the research team will conduct a second round of targeted interviews with individuals doing extraordinary work in each of our three research question areas outlined above, including: (a) artist/activist scholars from institutionally marginalized and community-based standpoints doing work that has expanded understandings of knowledge production, (b) extraordinary campus culture change catalysts who wield institutional power (inside and outside of higher education), and (c) collaborators with reciprocal university-community projects that use the methodologies of art, design, and humanities to shift campus culture and create impact on urgent public issues. The target number of interviews to be conducted is 20-30.

Questionnaire: A short questionnaire will be sent to all IA member campuses, learned societies, and other institutions identified by the LLI Leadership Cohort and Network Advisors to solicit examples of campus culture change efforts that respond to one or more of the three research questions. The survey will invite respondents to share websites and other materials for inclusion in an LLI resource archive. Categories will include exemplary projects, initiatives, and policy reforms that represent campus change efforts in support of public and activist scholarship.

Study Group: To facilitate peer learning, coalition building, and deeper engagement with the research questions, the LLI will facilitate monthly online dialogues. Inspired by the social movement study group tradition, some of these sessions will involve deep readings of critical texts on a range of topics from activist-scholar traditions, institutional culture/norms, inspirational programs and initiatives, mini-problem solving charrettes, and presentations of works in progress. These sessions will also provide an opportunity for a diverse array of stakeholders to discuss their own and competing theories of institutional change and the appropriate organizing strategies to create change. Some sessions will feature LLI leaders as hosts, and invitations to participate will be extended to IA member campuses. Following each study group session, IA staff will update the LLI page of the IA website with relevant resources, reading lists, and syllabi.

Engaged Graduate Student Research:

Davis Humanities Institute (DHI) Mellon Public Scholars

DHI Mellon Public Scholars Alana Stein and Lizbeth De La Cruz Santana will analyze data from the 20+ interviews conducted with former and current graduate students at UC Davis in order to develop a deeper understanding of the graduate student public activist-scholar experience. The culmination of this research will result in a qualitative analytic

document and will provide inputs toward the development of a guide designed to help faculty understand and support burgeoning public/activist scholars at UC Davis, as well as contribute to an understanding of the "graduate student experience." The LLI will sponsor a new DHI fellow in the summer of 2021 to build upon this research agenda.

Publicly Active Graduate Education

The LLI PAGE research project, led by PAGE Fellow alumni and former PAGE Co-Directors Romo and Gale Greenlee, will include online interviews and focus groups that explore graduate students' experiences and educational journeys at their institutions and through IA and other sponsored programs and initiatives. This project aims to highlight: (a) the importance of, need for, and benefits of publicly-engaged scholarship, (b) institutional and campus culture challenges/barriers that constrain community-engaged, public, and activist scholarship among graduate students, and (c) the spaces, communities, and individuals through which public, community-engaged, and activist graduate student scholarship is valued, cultivated, and supported.

Year Three, Sharing Tools and Organizing Change

The research, case studies, and network dialogues from years one and two will be analyzed, organized, and translated into collaboratively created guides, media, dialogue kits, syllabi, online resource archives, and popular education games. These tools will be shared widely in the IA network and beyond, including through webinars, workshops, and online training during year three of the LLI. The research team will also collaborate with the LLI Leadership Cohort, Network Advisors, and a variety of institutions in the creation of op-eds and online videos that highlight the important contributions of public scholarship in the arts, design, and humanities that can be shared with a broader national audience.

We look forward to engaging more widely during year two and three of the LLI. If you have ideas for interactive media, tools, or resources please let us know! To stay up to date, we encourage you to follow and engage in the following platforms:

CONTACT: Christina Preston, Research Associate, cepreston@ucdavis.edu

WEBSITE: https://imaginingamerica.org/what-we-do/collaborative-research/leading-and-learning-initiatives/

SOCIAL MEDIA: Follow Us on Twitter @imaginingamer   @EricaKohl   @upstatediva